



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority

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# Thirty things a governing body can do to engage with curriculum change

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## Summary

This briefing offers practical examples of how school governors can engage proactively with curriculum change. It does this by identifying 30 practical steps for governors who wish to engage positively with headteachers and senior leadership teams in the process of curriculum change in their school. The information provided by QCA is based on a seminar in the Information for School and College Governors (ISCG) Governors' Analysis series, and the briefing is shaped by the experience of practising school governors.

## Introduction

The curriculum is a responsibility of governors in partnership with the headteacher. Therefore the main audience for this briefing is governing bodies in partnership with heads, and particularly the curriculum committee or teaching and learning committee. While some of the suggested steps may seem familiar, and others daunting, all have been tried out by governors in school environments. We hope that each governing body using this briefing will interpret it within the context of their own school's needs, and by doing so will find at least some ideas transferable.

For maintained schools in England, the curriculum is changing. The new secondary curriculum, published in September 2007, can be found at [www.qca.org.uk/curriculum](http://www.qca.org.uk/curriculum). QCA's remit to support the Rose review of the primary curriculum is now underway as part of the Children's Plan. At the heart of the new curriculum are three key aims that will be the starting point for schools, whether they are considering whole-school issues or planning for individual lessons. These aims are for children and young people to become successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens. The five outcomes of Every Child Matters are also at the heart of the curriculum: for children to stay safe, be healthy, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. QCA's thinking on the curriculum, as it impacts on governors, is extensively set out in *A curriculum for the 21st century – A governors' guide*, published in association with the National Governors' Association. This is available to download from [www.qca.org.uk/curriculum](http://www.qca.org.uk/curriculum) (keyword: NGA), and was also a supplement to the September 2007 issue of *Governors News*.

This briefing gives governors a series of practical actions organised under five themes: understanding the context of your school; engaging with school leadership teams; providing a supportive learning environment; evaluating curriculum change; and spreading good practice.

The 30 suggestions are designed to be flexible, so that governing bodies can follow them selectively and in any order that is useful. The questions at the end of each section are designed to stimulate reflection and action. Through discussion groups, governors, heads and teachers can focus on those that are most relevant to the school's needs.

## **Understanding the context of your school**

At QCA we believe that a modern, world-class curriculum must inspire and challenge all learners, and prepare them for the future. To make this a reality, we need a curriculum that is flexible and adaptable, owned and valued by teachers and learners, enabling them to deal with the changes around them. This means that the curriculum will look and behave differently in various school and college contexts, within broad parameters of pupil entitlement. We hope to make learning irresistible, so that all young people will relish the opportunity to further their knowledge and develop new skills.

When schools and colleges consider curriculum change, it is appropriate for them to reflect on how their own context – urban or rural, high-achieving or challenging – influences the curriculum as experienced by young people.

Below are some suggestions to assist you in developing a curriculum that takes into account the context of your school.

1. Have a discussion to identify how some of the following factors might be impacting on learners in your school or college, both now and in the next ten years:
  - technological change
  - global and local environmental issues
  - a skills and service economy with a need for flexible, skilled lifelong learners
  - disengagement of some young people from school
  - cultural diversity
  - health issues.
2. Identify what characteristics you want your school leavers to possess. Brainstorm, then share, what the following phrases mean to members of the governing body: successful learners; confident individuals; responsible citizens. These are the three aims of the secondary curriculum. Make links between your list and the five outcomes of Every Child Matters, relating the links to your own school's context.

3. Explore the big picture of curriculum change (see [www.qca.org.uk/qca\\_5856.aspx](http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_5856.aspx)). By looking at the bottom line, which identifies the characteristics of a successful curriculum, begin to itemise how you want your school to measure its success.
4. Governors of secondary schools can explore the new secondary curriculum online by visiting [www.qca.org.uk/curriculum](http://www.qca.org.uk/curriculum). To familiarise themselves further, they can make use of the online tutorial on page 5 of *A curriculum for the 21st century – A governors' guide*.
5. Give parents a variety of accessible ways to receive information and to comment on the curriculum. This could include meetings, questionnaires, a regular mailing or a website presence.

#### **Questions**

- How does the governing body understand the context of the school?
- How does information gathered by the governing body relate to the bigger picture of curriculum change?

## **Engaging with school leadership teams**

A positive relationship between governors and heads, based on trust and an understanding of shared and separate areas of responsibility, can result in fruitful collaboration. When this relationship is in place, governor involvement can help to promote and shape curriculum innovation.

6. Ensure that the relationship between the head and the chair of governors is a good one, based on openness, honesty and frequent conferring. A shared sense of responsibility and a recognition of distinctive roles is vital.
7. Organise regular meetings between chairs of governing body committees and the head and leadership team, for exchange of information, concerns and opportunities.
8. Have high expectations of governing body members. Discover their interests and expertise, and give them opportunities to meet school staff informally.
9. Negotiate and establish a step-by-step programme for governor involvement in staff meetings, staff development, team/departmental meetings, classes, sporting and social events.
10. Appoint 'link' governors, whose role includes befriending one or more departments, key stages, subjects or strands within the school. Governors could also be linked to specific priorities such as Every Child Matters, community cohesion and wellbeing.
11. Create and use forums for listening to teachers, teaching assistants, other staff and students. A forum based on listening, recognising and praising success and making thoughtful interventions is likely to be more productive. Do not be afraid to ask questions in order to identify issues and create solutions.
12. Walk round the school and look for the school's mission statement or equivalent. Is it clearly visible and easy to understand?
13. Put aside one meeting per year for governing body self-evaluation and follow-up. This could be based on a questionnaire circulated and completed in advance, or more open questions could be used to structure a discussion. Consider making selective use of the questions raised in this briefing.
14. Identify a way to keep in touch with the ongoing development of the school's self-evaluation form (SEF). Ofsted will use this form to look for evidence of governor involvement in curriculum issues.

### Questions

- Do the head and the chair of governors agree on their shared responsibility and their distinctive roles?
- How well do governors know the staff? Through which channels are these relationships developed?
- Is there a clear statement of the school's aims and values? Is it visible in corridors and classrooms? Is it a living document, frequently referred to and reviewed? Is there a clear policy for keeping it live?
- Does a good understanding of the aims and values underpin decisions and interactions among the leadership and other staff?
- Does curriculum innovation fit into the school's mission statement? How do you know? How will it further the aims and values?
- How well does the governing body understand the progress and direction of the school, as defined in its SEF and improvement plan?
- Does the governing body know and agree on what success, in terms of the aims of the curriculum, looks like?
- Does a high-achieving school necessarily produce successful learners?
- Does a strongly pastoral school necessarily produce confident individuals?
- Does a strongly project-based school necessarily produce responsible citizens?

## **Providing a supportive learning environment**

Curriculum change requires a willingness to take risks and to learn from your mistakes. Governors can encourage this spirit of innovation by helping to create a professional environment in which responsible risk-taking is openly discussed, responsibility is shared and predictable problems are avoided. Schools need to feel secure that their governing body will stand by them, that 'we are all in this together'. This lays a responsibility on governors to earn the trust of the teaching staff. Through dialogue, governors can do much to generate an ethos in which staff feel it is professionally safe to ask questions, test theories and think creatively about the curriculum.

15. Create a school forum for checking that proposed curriculum developments are rooted in professional expertise, research or other evidence. Use this forum for establishing clearly what difference a proposed change would make, and how it would be evaluated.
16. Arrange joint staff and governor visits to schools, children's services centres or higher education centres where evidence of a successful development can be found.
17. Invite teaching staff to talk to you about different curriculum approaches.
18. Ask students for their views on their own learning experiences. For example, set up a system linking governors to the school council or to year groups, in order to engage a student voice in any proposed changes.
19. At every governing body meeting, share and celebrate at least one successful piece of innovative good practice.
20. Help to persuade parents about agreed changes, through making presentations and giving them opportunities to ask questions and express their views.



### Questions

- When considering the curriculum, use these three questions: What are we trying to achieve? How will we organise the learning? How will we know if a change has been successful?
- Has a change been proposed because it is financially expedient, administratively convenient, popular, or because there is reasonable evidence that it could improve learning?
- How do the outcomes (as defined by the big picture's 'bottom line') compare with previous years' data?
- How does the change reflect the aims and values of the school?
- What do samples of students' work, and their evaluative comments, tell us about change?
- Was there a defining moment that crystallised the thinking of staff and helped them to move on – for example, a student's comment, an educational visit or a parent's question?

## Evaluating curriculum change

There is a difference between monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring the day-to-day curriculum and its impact on learning is the task of professional teachers and other qualified staff. Governors need to know that it is happening, and to understand any data that is collated. They are then able to evaluate the impact of the curriculum and the success of new methodology. Governor evaluation needs to sustain a delicate balance, creating space for supportive, critical questioning without duplicating roles or undermining those responsible.

21. With any curriculum change, ask: 'how will we know what success looks like?'  
Generate success criteria, ensuring that special educational needs and diversity and equality perspectives are considered.
22. Be aware that retaining the status quo also carries risks.
23. Ensure that the school's managers have an appropriate way of predicting risk and rewarding innovation.
24. Connect the findings of evaluations to the school's SEF and improvement plan.

25. Invite a member of staff to make a presentation to the governing body, or a governors' committee, on a specific curriculum innovation.
26. Use the technique known as the 'learning walk' to help a small group of staff, governors or visitors gain a stronger awareness of an agreed aspect of the school and its curriculum. The learning walk is a procedure to support school and individual evaluation. It can be applied to any aspect of the school's life, including the curriculum or teaching and learning approaches.

#### **Questions**

- What has the school learnt from the evaluation process, and how will it move forward?
- How did the 'learning walk' strengthen governors' insights into the success of particular aspects of curriculum change? What did it indicate about the need and capacity for further change?

### **Spreading good practice**

Meeting and networking with other governors and teachers creates interest and can quickly disseminate good practice. Although time pressures may limit the number of visits and meetings that governors can attend, the rewards are considerable, especially when the purpose is specific and linked to the school's needs. Visits can take the form of seminars based on local clusters or a consortia of schools focusing on a shared project. Meetings with more distant schools that are 'statistical neighbours' – in other words performing in similar ways – might also be useful.

27. Use local authority advisers or consultants to generate ideas on which schools or clusters would make good dialogue or collaboration partners. Generate a list, prioritising those which offer benefits, as well as those that could benefit from your school's success.
28. Organise a swapshop of ideas with governors, leadership teams, middle managers or teaching staff, as appropriate.
29. Combine with other schools to provide joint training for governors, chairs of committees or leadership teams. This could include a day or half-day in another school, using techniques such as observing a class or work-shadowing a member

of staff. Governors could then report back to their own governing body on what they learnt.

30. Be proactive in letting others know about your school's successes in academic achievement and in other 'bottom line' measures such as community participation or healthy lifestyles. Talk to parents, community stakeholders, employers, faith groups, children's services professionals, the media, QCA (through its co-development networks), and young people themselves.

### Questions

- What benefits could you bring to teachers and learners by sharing your own experiences of lifelong learning?
- By drawing attention to good practice, what effect could you have on morale?

## Conclusion

This briefing comes at an exciting time for all schools – a time of curriculum change reflecting wider developments in global technology and work, as well as new insights into the diverse ways in which children and young people learn. At a time of increasingly personalised learning, there are no 'right' models of curriculum change. This means that creative, open conversations between a school's stakeholders are all the more beneficial when establishing a climate for positive change. It is hoped that governors, school leaders and school staff will find the suggestions here helpful in starting these discussions – and that ultimately, this help will translate into a better curriculum experience for all our young people.